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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 TILISI 001526

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: NATIONAL FORUM - QUIETLY BECOMING A PLAYER

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democratic development Georgia needed to undertake. In National Forum's view, true economic and political development was only achievable from within. Shartava and Melashvili said the goal should be to improve Georgia and raise it to EU or NATO standards but not view joining these organizations as some sort of magic bullet to solve Georgia's problems. Shartava said discussing the benefits of EU or NATO membership now was a false debate since Georgia was in no way ready to join either organization. Shartava and Melashvili said they supported joining the EU and/or NATO some time in the future but when Georgia would be prepared to be a full-fledged contributor and ally.

15. (C) Domestically, National Forum supports a general devolution of power to regions and villages as the only way to foster true civil society and democratic development. Shartava and Melashvili said the defense budget should be cut and directed towards more social spending. National Forum seeks to direct government resources on small business development and developing Georgia's internal market rather than solely attracting foreign investment. Shartava and Melashvili stressed to Poloff the importance of improving the educational system (with more resources) as key to Georgia's development. As for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Shartava and Melashvili were clear that Russia initiated the problems in both regions but also criticized Saakashvili for making unrealistic demands rather than negotiating with the separatists regimes. According to both, Saakashvili's rhetoric and unwillingness to compromise shut off any chance for progress.

Local Guys Want Self Rule

16. (C) Poloff visited with National Forum local leaders in both Kutaisi and Adjara. The theme that was repeated consistently was that local GoG authorities in both areas were unresponsive to the larger needs of the local populations. In Kutaisi, employment was the main concern. Local leaders said that constant changes of mayors in Kutaisi created a poor environment for investment. The Kutaisi leaders stressed that local officials should be elected and have budgetary authority which would make them accountable and responsive to their local electorate. Directly elected officials would also serve to promote a better investment environment due to increased political legitimacy. Adjara leaders also stressed above all other issues the need for local officials to control local budgets. They questioned how Adjara could be considered an autonomous republic within Georgia without the direct election of its governor or mayor. The local Adjara leaders stressed that a truly autonomous Adjara could serve as a positive example for potential reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into a more federal model of governance.

Rumors, Partners and Plan

¶7. (C) In the early days of the protests, rumors were rampant that the National Forum initially accepted money from pro-Kremlin sources; however, no concrete evidence has emerged to validate the rumors. National Forum was the first to quit the protests, leaving the streets before the May 25 rally. The Forum has been concentrating on continuing to develop its grass-roots political network ever since. Shartava guessed that the National Forum did not experience the same backlash as other non-parliamentary opposition leaders and parties because it never fostered false hopes that Saakashvili would immediately resign. In contrast, Shartava said that people want change but not instability. As a result, the National Forum is pursuing a longer term strategy based on what the Georgian public appears to want. Shartava indicated that they were speaking with Irakli Alasania's party, and to a lesser degree the Conservative party, to find mutually beneficial ways in which to cooperate, but said they had no desire to join any other party. Melashvili added that creating a viable political force was not a short-term process and that much more work was needed before the National Forum would be a major political player able to shape GoG policy decisions.

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